

## Higher Education Evening 5 May 2011

On Thursday 5 May in the DRT parents, pupils and staff across the whole of the PGS community attended a series of talks on issues that have dominated the Higher Education scene in recent months and years. Tuition fees, the implications of moves to 'widen access' to higher education, a growing interest in studying abroad and exactly what the expectations of the 'top' universities are in terms of candidate profile were all discussed.

Research suggests that the close association between the top universities and independent schools looks set to remain. Exam performance is still by far the most important factor in determining which universities candidates get in to (rather than type of school or background) and that there is a growing expectation that prospective students will have an increasingly 'international outlook' in their studies, experience and aspirations.

It was a particularly well-received and thought-provoking evening that stimulated debate as much as it sought to provide answers and allay fears. A brief summary of the four talks appears below.

**Professor John Craven, Vice Chancellor of the University of Portsmouth** in a talk entitled *'What's going on in universities – fees, loans and funding'* attempted to strike a balance between the current overwhelming focus on fees and funding and the real purpose of universities which is to drive the development of a highly skilled workforce. However:

- By 2012 the fee limit for universities will increase to £9,000 per year – a figure adopted by most universities.
- By 2015 most public funding for higher education will be gone – the funding burden will have almost entirely shifted on to students.
- What will be the consequences of this new 'independent' market-driven world of higher education? Certain courses at certain universities may have to do much more to prove their worth and survive.
- The traditional 'choice' upon leaving school at 18 – between university or job – is going to be further complicated by the prospect of incurring substantial graduate debt, possibly for a university course of unknown efficacy in the marketplace.
- *'Something is going to give,'* said Professor Craven. He had grave concerns about the socio-economic impact of graduates in middle age that may be unable to service mortgages, loans, debts and also to save effectively for retirement.

**Professor William Richardson, Head of the School of Education at Exeter University** and taking over as **General Secretary of the HMC** later this year put the link between the top-ranking universities and independent schools into sharp focus. The 'widening access' debate is double-edged – how many young people do we want going to university (currently 40%) and do the right young people get to the right universities regardless of their background? In addition, Professor Richardson reviewed the stark disparity in government funding which will remain substantial for higher education subjects deemed 'strategically important' (Education, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Science) but is set to wither for Arts and Social Science subjects.

- New research serves to emphasise the concentration of independent school pupils within the top universities. With just 9% of pupils educated independently in sixth forms:
  - 40% of entrants to the top 20 universities are from independent school
  - 45% of entrants to the top 5 universities are from independent school
  - 47% of entrants to the top 2 universities are from independent school
  - One third of all independent school leavers are concentrated in the ten top universities.
- Why are there such close links between independent schools and the top universities? Professor Richardson highlighted several common features from the **highly selective nature of admissions** to **highly qualified, specialist teachers** and from **a concentration upon 'traditional' core subjects** to expectations of the **highest graduate rewards**.
- According to Professor Richardson, there is no evidence to substantiate any theory that universities 'discriminate' against independent school pupils.
- Of all the features and factors of university entrants, UCAS points remain by far the most important. In spite of the political rhetoric about widening access, David Willetts has repeatedly said that there would be 'no quotas' imposed upon universities.
- However, the rise in tuition fees is going to heighten expectations amongst students of the teaching and tutoring that they get at university. There is a strong likelihood that universities are going to have to provide much more effective undergraduate teaching, possibly experiencing the same kind of regulatory inspections that schools currently experience.

**Mrs Lisa Montgomery, an expert in Admissions to universities in the USA**, provided a 'counterpoint' to the focus on UK university education and stressed the fundamental differences between American and British systems.

- In the USA there are no national publicly-funded institutions. Whilst some universities are funded by individual states, the top-ranking universities are all privately funded, many having enormous endowments of billions of dollars. The implication of this is profound since it allows universities to choose the student body (background, diversity etc) they want.
- The nature and structure of a degree in the United States is completely different to that of the UK. In the USA, degrees last for four years – the first

two are characterised by a broad 'liberal arts' (multi-disciplinary) approach, with the second two focused upon a particular academic area.

- Mrs Montgomery suggested that students with a liberal arts background, regardless of who they might encounter in their lives, would be able to ask the '*the next useful question*', thereby stressing the rich, contextualised education that such a programme offers.

**Paul Teulon is the Head of Student Recruitment at Oxford University** and provided an analysis of the competitive nature of entry to the top universities. His key message was that pupils at Oxford, Cambridge and many other top universities will be expected to study up to 45 hours per week. Consequently, a genuine commitment to a subject is vital. In fact, the subject needs to be '*part of a student's life*'. In evaluating candidates for the top universities, admissions tutors want to see that a candidate has gone '*above and beyond*' the exam specifications: has really engaged with a subject; has developed him- or herself with that subject in mind, academically and practically – not simply as a means to an end. In addition, Mr Teulon stressed a growth in interest and expectation of a strong 'international outlook' in the best candidates.

- Mr Teulon revealed that 36,000 pupils nationally are predicted and achieve three A grades at A2 Level or higher. 35% of which are pupils from independent schools.
- The International Baccalaureate is well understood by the top universities. Of the 17,144 applicants to Oxford in 2010, over a third were studying alternative qualifications to A Levels with over 1,000 applicants studying the IB at British schools.
- The Oxford acceptance success rate is almost identical for A Level and IB candidates, though slightly better for those studying the IB.
- At Oxford, the average applicant has 6.5 A\* grades at GCSE – those accepted average much higher. Across all *entrants*, the IB average is 766 (HL) with a 38-40 point range and 2.1 A\* grades at A Level.
- Although competition is fierce, there is huge variation between courses. Pupils who achieve three A grades, with two of those being in a modern foreign language will be amongst just a few hundred nationally. Pupils gaining A\* and A grades at A2 Level across, for example, science subjects will be amongst many thousands nationally. This has significant implications for application/success rates.